

## Conference Paper

# Discovering the Far East...': Images of the Territory in the Works of V. K. Arsenyev

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## Abstract

The article explores the works of the Far East explorer V.K. Arsenyev (1872–1930) with the purpose of using his works to find the representational potential of the region's image. Using social constructivism as a methodology, we outline and analyze scientific and artistic types of constructing the Far East image and demonstrate the place each of these types occupies in Arsenyev's works.

**Keywords:** regional image, constructivism, construct, visualization, Russian Far East, V.K.Arsenyev

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*"No writer who has ever travelled across the Far East failed to write a book about it" (V.Arsenyev)*

## 1. Introduction

One of the most important questions in contemporary regional studies is the construction of the images of Russian regions. Historically, professional scholars and travelers contributed greatly to the construction of territorial images – a fact that is well-known. Their works were the ones that often transformed an image of a region into an object of deliberate development that required certain tools and followed a specific direction. Among such scholarly texts, the works of V.K.Arsenyev are particularly notable. For three decades, he had been studying the Russian Far East creating both a detailed description of this region and the more imaginative and creative narratives.

Today, despite a number of works published about Arsenyev [1, 2, 6], his contributions are usually analyzed without taking into account contemporary theories on the construction of territory images developed outside Russia. Because of this, the logic of our article follows the ideas of social constructivism. This approach assumes that


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the figure of the researcher himself is vitally important, since he is the one who is constructing the territory image. It is also important to analyze the tools Arsenyev uses in this process, as well as the components of his image of the Far East, and to describe how this image is supported and transmitted both for internal and external audiences.

The sources of this article include general works on Arsenyev and archival sources from the Archives of the Society for Studying Amursk Krai (*Obshchestvo izucheniya Amurskogo kraya*) located at the city of Vladivostok – among them, the most valuable are the diaries of Arsenyev’s expeditions covering the period of 1906–1927.

## 2. Toward the Shores of the Ussuri River

V.K.Arsyeyev received military education in Saint-Petersburg Infantry Military School. Since childhood, he was interested in studying faraway regions which he imagined based on descriptions and opinions he heard or read in the relevant literature. According to his memoirs, “... fate ruled it thus that I found myself at the Administration of Fishing, Sea Fishing and Hunting of the Far East. This was the bridge that back then led me to Kamchatka, Bering islands and Shelekhov Sea (its Gizhiginsky and Penzhinsky bays), and then back to the Ussuri *krai*. My knowledge of local natural history was enriched by a multitude of personal impressions and observations” [AOIAK, f.14, op.5, d.142, l.140].

After his arrival at the Russian Far East in 1900, Arsenyev received books on Ussuri region from N.A.Pal’chevsky, the forester of the Ussuri Cossack Troops. He also made an acquaintance with M.G.Shevelyov, who provided Arsenyev with valuable advices on archeography, and later left him maps of the Ussuri region and Eastern Manchuria with notes on the places where the ruins of ancient settlements could be found. L.Ya.Sternberg, who had been a political deportee at the Sakhalin island, and later became chief ethnographer at the Museum of Anthropology, provided Arsenyev with a wide range of ethnographic works: Shrenk’s *Inorodtsy Amurskogo kraya* (‘The Aliens of Amur Krai’), Middendorf’s *Korennyye obitateli Sibiri* (‘Siberia’s Indigenous Inhabitants’), Maak’s *Puteshestviye po doline Ussuri* (‘Travels along the Ussuri Valley’), and Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*. Later, after he already was a famous traveler, Arsenyev remembered: “When my dream came true, and I started towards the Far East, it was a heart stopping moment” [AOIAK, f.14, op.6, d.135, l.35].

Over the five years (1900–1905), Arsenyev made a number of travels across Yuzhno-Ussuriysky Krai, studying the Far East and its indigenous population. In 1906–1909, he

undertook four large-scale expeditions to the central part of the Sikhote-Alin mountains; in 1917, he travelled to the mountainous region of Yan-de-Yanga; later he undertook several expeditions to Gizhiginsky district and Kamchatka (1919–1926) and, finally, in the summer of 1927 Arsenyev crossed Sikhote-Alin following Sovetskaya Gavan – Khabarovsk route.

Throughout all his journeys, Arsenyev, with his typical exactitude, wrote diaries, draw schemes and sketches, made tables and even pasted the figures of animals, humans and deities made by the local people out of the thin birch bark (Orochi, Udege, Nanai, Taz, Ulch). Arsenyev was so skillful in arranging his geographical, ethnographic, historical and geological material that today the readers of his travel diaries “imagine with total clearness the expedition’s route, its atmosphere, the terrain, the beautiful natural landscapes; they literally feel the environment surrounding expedition throughout its way” [5, p. 4]. The total oeuvre left by Arsenyev comprises over 50 works – some of them professional scholarly texts (in geography, ethnology, archaeology, statistics), while others fall into the genre of creative non-fiction: ‘Along the Ussuri Land’, ‘Dersu Uzala’, ‘V debryakh Ussuriyskogo kraya’ (‘In the Wilderness of Ussuri Land’), ‘Skvoz’ taigu’ (‘Through the Taiga’), etc. According to the Arsenyev’s biographers, his own image, which, in a famous expression of A.M.Gorky, ‘combined Brehm and Fenimore Cooper’, as well as the image of the Far East he created, has for a long time determined the perceptions of this region, both in Russia and abroad.

Just how and by what means this image of the region was constructed in Arsenyev’s writings? What provides a foundation for the images of the Far East appearing in his works? In what ways scientific and imaginative discourses overlap and co-exist in Arsenyev’s research?

### 3. V.K. Arsenyev’s Research Expeditions

Throughout the Arsenyev’s writings, we can find two ways in which he constructs an image of the Far East: one scientific, another imaginative. What is particularly interesting is that both the scientific and the imaginative descriptions are closely intertwined: for example, a region’s scientific descriptions are often based on the lyrical narratives using figurative and imaginative techniques to enrich their content.

However, scientific (geographic, demographic and statistic) descriptions remain the foundation of Arsenyev’s image of the Far East. In his 1920s survey article *Polozheniye Dal’nevostochnogo kraya i yego granitsy* (‘The Location of the Far East Region and Its Borders’), Arsenyev writes: “In terms of exploration status, the entire territory of

the Far East region (*Dal'nevostochnyi krai*) may be divided as follows: 10% known in detail, 60% known perfunctorily, 30% are the regions completely unknown, even in geographical terms" [AOIAK, f.14, op.1, d.49, ll.1-3].

To set the boundaries of the Far East territory, Arsenyev uses the naming procedure. In constructivist terms, naming of local geographical objects inserts the region's representation into the sociocultural space. Arsenyev performs representation of the Far East territory through mapping, topographic surveying and plotting the localities. In his diaries we can find schematic maps of fishing rivers, mountain passes and woods. These drawings reflect, among others, geographical notions of the indigenous population. The terrain here is mapped in great detail, with names using hunting and fishing toponyms, botanical names, economic activities, tribal and clan names. Arsenyev's travel diaries also contain detailed scientific descriptions of geographical and climatic conditions of the Russian Far East, its terrain, population, resources and approaches to colonization.

The descriptions of the Far Eastern territory itself are accompanied by the notes on the region's population based on overt observation. Arsenyev's diaries contain ethnographic descriptions of the life of the indigenous population of Far East: the Oroch, the Gold, but most of all the Udege. Among other factors, Arsenyev explains successful adaptation of the Far Eastern peoples by their cultural attitudes and value systems. For example, he notes that the Chinese are not colonizers by character, "they are sophisticated people with philosophical bend of mind; entrepreneurial, energetic, proud of their centuries-old civilization, and therefore not particularly compliant" [Ibid., l.26]. Koreans are always ready and eager to help others... They are incapable of ruling other people, and easily become subjugated by those with more power [Ibid, ll. 40, 43]. The Japanese, on the other side, are closely knit together into a strong organized mass and, through their 'Uradzivaki oruminkai' society in Vladivostok, support each other in dangerous periods [Ibid, l.95].

Arsenyev also provides a scholarly forecast of the region's development and gives an expert opinion on its effective political and economic management. He believed that "the only way to prevent foreign immigration to these regions is their denser settlement with the economically strong settlers. The best settlers, in our opinion, would be the people from the northern *guberniyas* of the European part of the Union (the Great Russians), and particularly the Old Believers" [AOIAK, f.14, op.1, d.64, l.37].

## 4. In the 'land of Dersu Uzala'

Imaginative description can be considered as significant a factor in constructing the image of the Far East, as the scientific exploration of its territory. Such imaginative creative tools fully reveal Arsenyev's dialogue with this territory, allowing him to present his musings on the meetings of the two cultures happening in the region: the colonizing and the indigenous one. Imaginative narratives created by Arsenyev have also molded the standard images of the Far Eastern nature and its residents, creating and consolidating both auto- and hetero-stereotypes.

Arsenyev consciously used creative narrative techniques in his descriptions of the Far East. These techniques allowed him to express his local experience more precisely and emotionally. Just how important Arsenyev considered this creative aspect of his works is obvious from his manuscripts and galley proofs preserved in the archive. Arsenyev took a long time to correct specific phrases in his manuscripts, choosing the most eloquent expressions and replacing the unfortunate phrasings. In his archive, there are a lot of carefully cut out pieces of paper filed in envelopes marked as: 'Rain', 'Storm', 'Morning', 'Fire', 'Birds', 'Moonlight', etc. [AOIAK, f.14, op.1, d.102]. Each envelop contains extracts from classical literary works: novels, travel diaries, writings of natural scientists (A.M.Gorky, Ch.Dickens, A.Kuprin, C.Farrère, I.S.Turgenev, A.Brehm, N.N.Przhevalsky).

Arsenyev also used expressive tools typical for creative writing: comparison, metaphor, extended metaphor, personification. Here is a passage from his book 'Along the Ussury land': "As soon as we made the first step, luxurious grasses covered us completely. They were so high and so dense that one seemed to drown in them. Below, under our feet, was grass, ahead and behind of us – grass, everywhere around us was also grass, and only above there was a blue sky. It seemed to us that we were wading across the floor of the grass sea" [3, p. 29]. And, true to his character, Arsenyev immediately inserts a scientific explanation: "Among these grasses were mainly reeds (*Phragmites communis* Trin.) which can reach the height of up to 3 meters, reedgrass (*Calamagrostis villosa* Mutel) – 1.5 meters..." (Ibid). Among the creative techniques used by Arsenyev is an image of Dersu Uzala, a local native personifying the territory. On the one hand, he embodies the uniqueness and vividness of a literary character; on the other, he symbolically represents those features that Arsenyev highlights in the region itself: close affinity with nature, resilience and stamina, natural view of the world and moral action.

Arsenyev's literary narratives allowed the reader, first, to imagine an emotionally charged picture of the Far East and, second, due to the very character of the imaginative representation of reality, to construct a multifaceted (non-linear) image of the region and its inhabitants. As it was described in the newspapers of the late 1920s, "All this material, completely inaccessible to the masses and only in a tiny part accessible for the academic circles, which required huge efforts and costs to find it, sort through it and acquire it... all this material is presented in a lively connection with each other, with its environment, and with the entire genuine, unique, interesting and, until now, almost unknown life" [AOIAK, f.14, op.2, d.56, l.18].

## 5. Conclusions

The image of the Far East in Arsenyev's works is constructed at the junction between the scientific and the imaginative discourse. In building this image, Arsenyev uses various techniques (scientific description, naming, cartography, photo- and video-recordings, creative writing), which add up to create a comprehensive holistic perception of the region [4, p. 110].

We believe that the dominant components of this image constructed by V.K. Arsenyev are:

- an image of an incredibly diverse pristine nature yet untouched by the cultural expansion and pragmatic reorganization;
- an image of the territory that still holds the possibility of an authentic life, a life that is harsh and dangerous but also full of meaning; of a world yet waiting to be explored;
- an image of the region full of rich and diverse resources, thus possessing completely new opportunities and perspectives for development;
- an image of the space of interaction between diverse cultural traditions, a Russian 'window to Asia', a point of contact with the vibrant cultures of China, Japan and Korea.

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## Abbreviations

AOIAK - Archives of the Society for Studying Amursk Krai (Obshchestvo izucheniya Amurskogo kraya), city of Vladivostok.

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